

CHAPTER THREE



Adam sat in the next-to-last pew wishing he'd sat farther forward this Sunday. And on the other side of the church, nearer the piano.

The reason for his wistful what-ifs, when he should have been thinking about the Scripture reading he'd just heard, was the lovely young woman playing the prelude. Cassie ... Something. He had yet to discover her last name. She'd attended his church for several weeks now, maybe as long as a couple of months. He wasn't really sure when she'd first appeared with auburn-haired Jenna Sperling.

Jenna was a chatterbox and very outgoing. She also had a boyfriend, Adam was sure. She and Travis Doake had showed up together at the pre-Valentine singles potluck in the church fellowship hall, and they'd been sitting together during services ever since. Cassie usually sat on Jenna's other side now, a quiet but attractive sidekick well worthy of notice. Her blonde hair was pulled back at the sides today and cascaded over the shoulders of her blue dress. Adam remembered that her eyes were blue too. He wished he was sitting close enough to see them.

Cassie finished a hymn and rose, gathering her music. The

regular pianist, Mrs. Paulette, took her place on the piano bench as soon as Cassie slid off it. The song leader walked to the podium, and Mrs. Paulette struck the opening chords of the first congregational hymn. Adam lost sight of Cassie, but he was determined to find her after the service. It was now or never.

The church had scheduled a college drama team's performance for Friday evening. Adam had thought of asking Cassie two weeks ago, when he first learned about it, but he hadn't dared approach her. She seemed sweet-tempered and modest ... so right in every way. But what if she said no?

Today was probably the last time he'd see her before the play. If he didn't ask her now, he wouldn't have a chance. He didn't have her phone number, and he didn't even know her last name. Of course, he could ask Jenna or the pastor. His face reddened, just from thinking about it. No, he would walk up to her right after the service and ask her.

What if she already had a date?

He refused to entertain the idea. If she said no, for whatever reason, he would smile and say ... what? "Maybe some other time." That was it. Leave things open. Let her know he'd like to see her sometime if she was at all inclined. That would be better than just accepting her refusal as final. After all, the performance was only five days away. Sometimes girls made other plans. She might be going away for the weekend, or working, or ...

He didn't even know what she did for work, or *if* she worked. She might be a student. She might be living off a trust fund and have no need to work. She might ...

All around him, people stood, and Adam jumped up, too, knocking his hymnbook to the floor. He smiled sheepishly at the older woman sitting a couple of feet away and stooped to pick it up. Time to come back to earth.

DOWN IN THE DUMPSTER

"I'll meet you at the car," Jenna said. "Travis has got to get me something out of his truck."

"Sure." Cassie watched her roommate move off down the crowded church aisle with her hand tucked firmly through Travis Doake's arm at the elbow of his city police department uniform. Too bad Travis hadn't shown up at the senior complex the other day when she'd needed help. A cop with a friendly face would have made the ordeal easier. At least the rest of her work week had gone smoothly.

She gathered her purse, Bible, bulletin, and music book, then eased out into the aisle. Travis would go on duty in an hour, so she and Jenna weren't eating lunch with him today. They'd head home in Cassie's car and open a can of soup and make sandwiches.

"Hi. Cassie, isn't it?"

She looked up and focused on a young man with shiny dark hair and very blue eyes. A little quiver of pleasure shot through her. She hadn't even realized he was here today, but now it appeared he'd stalled in the aisle, waiting for her. And he'd remembered her name.

"Yes. How are you?"

"Great. Uh ... I'm Adam. We met at the end of the Sunday school class last week."

"I remember." She couldn't help smiling. As a matter of fact, she'd remembered him several times this week, when she wasn't thinking about stiff dead bodies in her dumpster. "I ... uh ... my roommate and I were running late this morning, so we missed Sunday school."

His smile widened. "Is Jenna your roommate?"

"Yes. We're old school friends, and she offered to share her apartment with me when I moved here a couple of months ago."

"That's great." They were almost to the entry, where Pastor Nickerson stood with his wife beside him, shaking hands with parishioners. Adam spoke hurriedly, as though afraid he'd run out of time to speak to her if he didn't get it out at a hundred

miles an hour. “Listen, this drama thing Friday night—are you coming?”

Cassie hesitated. Was he asking her to go with him? Maybe he was on the refreshment committee or something. “Uh ... I was thinking about it.”

His worried expression cleared. “Would you go with me? I hear the team is really good.”

She smiled. It would beat karaoke with Kieran any day, even if Adam turned out less than ideally compatible. Right now, her impressions of him said he was shy and strait-laced, but cute and interested in the Lord. He seemed to be a regular at both Sunday school and worship services. Jenna repeatedly advised her to keep an open mind where men were concerned. Today she would open her mind up wide and ask God to show her whether cute-shy Adam was the one for her.

The worry lines crept back onto his forehead. She was taking too long to answer.

“I’d like that, Adam.”

She almost laughed as he relaxed into the winning smile again. It felt good to give him hope. She’d have to be careful with this one, though. If he was the desperate type and she ended up having to let him down ... No, she wouldn’t go there. Maybe Friday night would turn out to be the date she’d waited for all these years. Twenty-five wasn’t so old to be finding Mr. Right at a church function. She would find out more about Adam and keep her mind as open as the church door before them. One just never knew.

Her mom would be ecstatic—but she knew immediately that she wouldn’t tell her mother about the upcoming date until after it was over. Mom tended to hover and want to know every detail about those things. Cassie didn’t want to raise her expectations too high until she knew she and Adam would at least remain friends.

They reached the foyer, and she shook Mrs. Nickerson’s hand.

DOWN IN THE DUMPSTER

“Good to see you again, Cassie. We enjoyed your music.”

“Thank you.” Cassie took a step and shook the pastor’s outstretched hand.

“How’ve you been, Cassie?” he asked.

She gave him a scrunched-up smile. Pastor knew all about the body in the dumpster. She’d called him and asked him and Mrs. Nickerson to pray after the nightmare she’d had Friday night after finding the dead man.

“Much better, Pastor. Thank you.” She hoped he wouldn’t say anything direct about the incident. She didn’t want to have to explain all that to Adam. He didn’t belong in the world of Reuben’s Rubbish Removal. In fact, she hoped they could at least make it to their date on Friday night without her having to tell him where she worked.

The pastor’s wife said to Adam, “Mrs. Olson asked me if I thought you’d be willing to help with junior church next week, since her helper will be out of town. I told her I’d ask.”

“Sure,” Adam said without hesitation. “I’ll call her this afternoon.”

He shook the pastor’s hand, and suddenly they were out in the bright warmth of noon. Sunny days in central New York state were not something Cassie took for granted. She’d driven the trash truck through rain and drizzle for three days this week. The June rays bathed her in contentment as she scanned the parking lot and spotted Jenna and Travis standing near her car.

“Looks like Jenna’s waiting for me. Do you want to meet here Friday evening?”

“I’d be happy to pick you up at your place. If you don’t mind.”

He sported a mild flush, and Cassie smiled. “That’s fine.” She gave him the address, and they agreed on a time.

“I’ll see you.” Adam backed away, smiling and waving.

“Bye.” She hoped he’d look where he was going before he bumped into something.

She hurried to join Jenna.

"I'll call you later," Travis said to Jenna. "See you, Cassie."

"Bye, Travis." Cassie unlocked the car doors, and she and Jenna piled in.

"So. Adam was talking to you, huh? I'm surprised. He's so quiet."

"Is he?" Cassie asked, aiming for a nonchalant air. "He's not weird or anything, is he?"

"Adam? No. He's a good guy. Just doesn't talk much."

"Well, I hope he talks Friday night. Not during the play, of course, but some. On the way, for instance."

"*What?* You're going out with him?"

Cassie turned and eyed her in dismay. "What's wrong? You said he was a good guy."

"He is. I'm just ... speechless. You haven't had a date since you moved here."

"I've been settling in."

"I wouldn't have expected Adam to ask you out. I mean, all the single gals at church have given up on him."

"Really?"

"Yeah. He's like the confirmed bachelor of Grace Community."

"Wow. I guess I'm special."

Jenna grinned at her. "I knew that anyway, but ... yeah. Adam might be perfect for you. He likes dogs way too much." She waved a hand as though dismissing that drawback. "I was thinking more of Jim Rawleigh or Gordy Herbert, but I can see you and Adam together."

"Good," Cassie said dryly, "because unless you shut your eyes Friday night, you'll see that very thing." She couldn't help wondering if she'd just made a big mistake. And yet, could a quiet man who liked dogs be all bad?

The good weather held on Monday, and Cassie decided to spend her morning off at the senior complex. She had mixed feelings about it, but she hadn't been able to stop thinking about the man in the dumpster. Who was he? Why had he been at Silver Dawn on Friday morning? If she could visit with her elderly friends on her day off, maybe they wouldn't try to stop her when she was working. And she might learn something more about the dead man.

She drove into Silver Dawn and headed up the cul-de-sac where the residents she knew best lived. She put on her turn signal at Lucy's driveway. Before she made the turn, she noticed that farther down the street several people were moving about in Ed and Flossie Simonson's yard. She rolled on down the street and parked at the curb.

Hal, Gerald, and the Simonsons stared at her as she climbed out. After a second, Gerald broke into a grin and waved.

"Hey, Cassie! Didn't recognize you without the garbage truck."

She smiled and ambled toward them. "Doing some gardening?"

"Yeah." Ed got up from his kneeling position on the walkway. "Oh, my knees! We're too old for this."

Hal was sweeping the walk, and Gerald came along behind him with a bucket of some cleaning solution and a mop. Ed and Flossie appeared to be ready to set out a border of annuals. It was a little late in the season to plant petunias and pansies, but Ed had probably gotten them for half price at the home and garden store.

"Going for a red and white border, eh?" she asked.

Flossie nodded, frowning. "I told Ed I wanted yellow and purple, but he said he had to take what they had left."

"It's okay, Flossie," Gerald said. "We'll have your yard spruced up in no time, and it will be so pretty you'll forget you ever wanted yellow."

“So, what brings you out, Cassie?” Hal asked, leaning on the broom handle.

“Just wanted to see how you all were doing.”

Silence. She looked from face to face.

Cassie cleared her throat. “So, uh ... how long did it take the police to go through all that trash Friday?” She glanced toward the dumpster. “Looks like they cleaned it all up when they were done.”

“They took all the trash away,” Gerald said.

“Really? I wonder why.”

“Cops don’t need a reason.” Ed’s words held a bitter edge.

“They did a lot of poking around on Friday.” Flossie nodded as if that was an irrefutable fact, then shot a glance at her husband. Ed just scowled.

“What’s going on?” Cassie asked. “Is there something you all are not telling me?”

The four looked at each other, and then Flossie stepped toward her. “You may as well know, dear. They took Ed’s .22 rifle.”

“What?”

Flossie nodded, and tears glistened in her eyes. “Ed was downright upset.”

“There was no need.” Her husband scratched his jaw. “I need that gun for when we have varmints around here.”

“Now, Ed,” Gerald said, “they told you you’ll get it back.”

Cassie opened her mouth and then closed it again. The only reason she could think of for the police to confiscate Ed’s gun—assuming he hadn’t accidentally fired it in the residential complex again—would be if the man in the dumpster died of a gunshot wound. Were the cops testing Ed’s varmint gun right now to see if it was the murder weapon?

“There, now, don’t fuss about it.” Flossie patted his hand. “You don’t need that gun anymore, anyway. If we get raccoons around here, Kieran or his father will see to it.”

Hal sidled up to Cassie and murmured, “I think Flossie’s

DOWN IN THE DUMPSTER

relieved that they took it. Ed's not always real careful where he aims that rifle."

She nodded and said to them all, "What else did the police look at?"

"They spent a long time going over your company's dumpster," Gerald said.

"Oh, yes." Ed shoved his white hair back with one hand. "I think they might have found some blood on the outside of it."

"Oh?" Cassie walked toward the dumpster, and the four oldsters followed.

"They took some kind of sample," Ed said, pointing to the corner of the trash container. "Right there."

Cassie crouched, but she couldn't see anything other than peeling paint and rust. "I haven't seen much about it on the news. They haven't arrested anyone, have they?"

"No," Hal said. "We're watching real close. In today's paper they put a little paragraph saying they're still investigating. How long does that take, do you know?"

She shook her head. "Could take a while, I guess." Cassie never read newspapers. She got her news online or occasionally on TV. She turned back toward the houses.

Lucy Jansen came out of her driveway and met them at the end of the Simonsons' walkway. She wore kneepads over her loose blue pants. "Hello, Cassie. I didn't know you were here."

"I just came by to say hi. How are you doing?"

"Fine." Lucy held up a trowel. "Flossie said they were planting flowers this morning, so I came over to help."

"She's been asking about the investigation," Ed said.

"Oh." Lucy eyed her keenly. "There was a strange car here the other night. Friday night, wasn't it, Flossie?"

"Yes, I think so. It was parked around the corner from Lucy's house."

"But it's gone now," Lucy said quickly.

"That was nothing," Hal said.

Gerald frowned. "Maybe it was, and maybe it wasn't. What

about those rough-looking young men who came around yesterday afternoon?" He looked at Cassie. "They were poking through the dumpster."

"Do you think they were looking for clues about the murder?" Lucy asked.

"Who said it was murder?" Gerald asked, frowning at her.

"Nah," Ed said. "They were looking for scrap metal. I saw they had some on the back of the old pickup they was driving."

Hal stepped closer to Lucy. "You don't have to worry about them, Lucy. I called Mr. Harmon, and he and Kieran came out and told them to get out of here and not come back. Scavengers. But they won't be back."

Cassie smiled. She'd suspected for a couple of weeks now that Hal was sweet on Lucy. She was glad all the friends seemed to be looking out for each other and minding who came in and out of their neighborhood. Probably best to just forget about the dead man, unless the police called her.

"Heads up," Gerald said suddenly.

"Huh?" Cassie looked toward the sidewalk and saw the reason for his alert. Kieran was strolling toward them, carrying some sort of boom box.

"Well, hi there, Rubbish Goddess."

Cassie couldn't stop her upper lip from curling. "I refuse to answer to that name, Kieran."

"Yeah." Lucy put one hand on Cassie's shoulder. "If you want to talk to Miss Cassie, you'd better address her politely, sonny."

Kieran grinned. "Look here. I just got it." He patted the machine he was carrying.

"What is it?" Ed asked.

"A portable karaoke machine."

Gerald, the retired music teacher, groaned, and Cassie had a hard time not joining him.

Kieran's smile faded. "I thought maybe we could hold a talent night for the residents at the community center."

DOWN IN THE DUMPSTER

“Hey, that’s not such a bad idea,” Hal said. “I happen to know Lucy can sing like a warbler. And Ed, you and Flossie could do a duet, I’ll betcha.”

“Great!” Kieran beamed on them. “How about Friday night?”

“Sure,” said Gerald.

Flossie nodded. “Why not?”

Kieran turned to Cassie. “Will you come, Cassie? I bet you can sing.”

“No thanks, Kieran. I’ve got plans Friday night, but I appreciate the invitation. I’m sure you’ll all have fun.” She waved at the group in general. “Bye, folks. See you soon.”

She dashed for her car before Kieran could try to pump her Friday night plans out of her.